morris louis

paintings

morris louis

Out of the large body of work left by the late Morris Louis the four "Omega" pictures in the present exhibition represent a high point in what could be called a sub-series of pictures. Some months after Louis' tragic death in 1962 an inventory was taken to determine the number, size and variety of his oeuvre. Over four hundred pictures were counted, most of them rolled and stored in the artist's Washington, D. C. studio. Louis' manner of working was documented in Michael Fried's catalog introduction[1] for a retrospective exhibition of the artist's work in 1967. A second and more comprehensive inventory was taken one year ago and it was only then that the half-dozen or more posthumously titled Omega pictures were seen as a single body of work completed sometime in the winter of 1959-60.

The Omega series precede the so-called unfurled pictures of 1961 and were probably painted during the period which produced such late veil paintings as *Terranean* of 1959 and the floral pictures, as for example, *Untitled A*, 1960.[2] A single Omega painting was exhibited in a March 23-April 16 1960, exhibition at French and Company in New York, Louis' dealer at that time.

[1] *Morris Louis 1912-1962*, Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, 1967.
[2] *Ibid.*

paintings

Two questions may strike the viewer after the initial shock of sheer visual beauty has been absorbed when confronted with these works. How, for instance, did the artist manage to achieve the dazzlingly fresh color effects on such large formats? And how do these pictures relate stylistically to the rest of his work? In a sense the answers to both questions dovetail. Louis' breakthrough to a mature painting style came about at the time when he discovered what he could do with successive layers of drastically thinned pigment painted on and into an absorbent cotton duck ground. Technically these early (1954) paintings seem to have been handled very much like traditional watercolor in the sense that a building up of color washes beginning with very pale color tones and ending with the darkest, low key color tones approximated aerial space. In fact, however, Louis eschewed the obvious watercolor approach and began these veil pictures with the most intense hues and in a sense dissolved the primary impact with rich secondary and tertiary color. One of the most interesting qualities about the Omega series is that they refer back to the underpainting of the earlier veil pictures while at the same time prefiguring the unfurled series in both the openly declarative color and the stacking of color shapes beginning at the sides of the canvas ground.

Louis' almost unbelievably acute color was matched with a desire to get his color onto the ground in as exact a way as was possible. He obviously experimented with various canvas priming techniques which were adjusted to match the variously thinned color so as to control the spread of each color-shape. The reticent grace and lucidity of his paintings give individual testimony to his success.

James Monte

Omega I. 1959-60.*
Oil miscible acrylic on canvas. 145 x 104.
Lent by André Emmerich Gallery.

Omega II. 1959-60.
Oil miscible acrylic on canvas. 145 x 104.
Lent by André Emmerich Gallery.

Omega III. 1959-60.
Oil miscible acrylic on canvas. 145 x 104.
Lent by André Emmerich Gallery.

Omega IV. 1959-60.
Oil miscible acrylic on canvas. 144 x 104 3/8.
Lent by André Emmerich Gallery.

* Color illustration courtesy André Emmerich Gallery.

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